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RUEHKI/AMEMBASSY KINSHASA 0287
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SUBJECT: RWANDA'S LIBERAL PARTY IN TURMOIL

REF: KIGALI 746

Classified By: Ambassador Michael R. Arietti, reason 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Liberal Party (PL) leadership has been embroiled in a continuing leadership dispute, the losing faction in hotly contested national congress elections alleging corruption and general misuse of party funds by the winning side. First suspended by party leadership, five senior party officers including two members of parliament have now been expelled from the party. Facing the loss of their seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the two MPs, Elie Ngirabakunzi and Isaie Murashi, have contested their suspension in court, and have sought an injunction halting any effort to remove them from Parliament. While each side accuses the other of seeking to control party resources to further their own careers, the dispute also reflects a tension between those wishing to adopt a more independent line from the ruling Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), and those who opt to continue the PL's cooperative stance. The dispute harms the PL's organizational efforts for the 2008 House of Deputies elections, and plays into the hands of the ruling RPF. End summary.

¶2. (U) One of three parties to win seats in Parliament by direct election in 2003 (five other parties gained seats by appointment or indirect election on a non-partisan basis), the PL has greatly expanded its organizational efforts in the wake of the June 1 law allowing political party offices to be opened "at all administrative levels." In early August, the PL conducted its quadrennial national congress, electing new party leaders. A slate of candidates considered close to the ruling RPF won most senior positions, including, in close votes, Commerce Minister Protais Mitali as President and Senator Odette Nyiramilimo as 1st Vice President (reftel).

¶3. (SBU) In the days following the elections, several losing candidates alleged election irregularities. Newly re-elected party treasurer, MP Elie Ngirabakunzi, his fellow MP Isaie Murashi, and three provincial leaders supported these allegations in formal communications to party leadership organs. In a September 26 discussion with pol/econ chief, Anicet Kayigema, PL leader and Political Party Forum executive secretary, said the PL's election commission, executive committee and national council (its most senior leadership body) each in turn examined and rejected the allegations. Procedurally, said Kayigema the complaining officers had missed a deadline for filing their election complaint. Substantively, he added, the three bodies found nothing to confirm the allegations. Kayigema noted he had offered the "good offices" of the Party Forum in mediating

the dispute, but said he had been cautious to "offer no more than what the PL might want," as he and others on the Forum wanted political parties "to solve their own problems."

¶4. (U) Accusing the party organs of a lack of independence, the five dissident officials then wrote to the Ministry of Local Government, asking for an independent review of the August party elections. In response, party leadership, directed by Party President Mitali, suspended the five men. Following threats by the dissidents to contest their suspension in court and their continuing allegations of corruption, the PL leadership expelled the five men from the party. Mitali then wrote to the Parliament and to the National Election Commission on September 27, informing each of the decision and requesting new members by appointed to Parliament in place of the two dissident MPs. (Note: article 78 of the Rwandan constitution requires that, upon expulsion of an MP from his party, he "shall automatically lose his seat in the Chamber of Deputies." End note).

¶5. (C) Pol/econ chief met with MP Elie Ngirabakunzi on September 29, who spoke of his and fellow dissident MP Murashi's September 28 filing of a law suit and request for an injunction at the Kigali High Court. The suit, he explained, contests their expulsion and requests a halt to any effort to replace them in Parliament. Ngirabakunzi freely acknowledged that the five dissidents had missed the procedural deadline for contesting party election results, saying "we wanted to call the party's attention to the problems inside the party, not change the results." He said that the dissidents had at one point offered to withdraw their complaints, to no avail. "They (party leaders) wanted to be rid of us." Noting that genocide survivors formed a core constituency of the PL, he said that survivors in senior positions in Rwanda society (such as Senate President and Social Democratic Party president Vincent Biruta, and former head of survivors' organization IBUKA Francois Ngarambe, an RPF supporter) had attempted to mediate the dispute without success.

¶6. (c) Ngirabakunzi said their expulsion from the party was an attempt by Mitali and other party leaders to "keep party resources for themselves." He noted with a wry smile that party president Mitali "is the next name on the PL election list," and could move from Commerce Minister to the Parliament if he so wished (Note: under the Rwandan constitution, any replacement must come from the party's national list used in the previous Parliamentary elections). Commenting on a recent string of stories in the government-controlled New Times alleging malfeasance in the Commerce Ministry, "Mitali may wish to make that change," he said. He agreed that he and others in the party had hoped to see a more independent line adopted by the PL in its relations with the ruling RPF, a policy change he said Mitali and others "did not want." By contrast, he said, many in the RPF were "quite happy" to see a weakened PL and a weakened president at its head.

¶7. (C) Ngirabakunzi said he hoped to remain in the party and help it prepare for next year's House of Deputies elections, and he had counseled supporters around the country to "remain in the party." He said the party was greatly encouraged by the response from the countryside since it began organizing for its congress and "we don't want to miss our chance." With some pride he said his case would be the first time in Rwandan history that political party officers had gone to court to enforce their rights. Ending on an optimistic note, Ngirabakunzi said the current dispute "will make the party stronger."

¶8. (C) Comment. Each side to the dispute accuses the other of focusing on "careerist opportunities," such as maintaining control of the party's national list in advance of next year's Parliamentary elections, and offering themselves for senior positions in Rwanda's cooperative system of government (in which half the cabinet positions must be shared outside the ruling party, for example). Politics can seem rather incestuous here -- senior officials in all eight ostensibly

independent parties also serve in a variety of senior government positions, and it sometimes appears as if everyone in authority is related to everyone else by marriage, school or business ties. However, the PL dispute also reflects a genuine debate within the party on its proper stance toward the dominant RPF. Unfortunately for the PL, the RPF is not an entirely disinterested observer. We see the PL's post-congress saga of accusations as a reflection of democracy at work, however messily, as a small but ambitious party seeks its proper role in the Rwandan political system.

ARIETTI